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## A Brief Biography of Lavinnia Florance Minis

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A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF  
LAVINNIA FLORANCE MINIS

BOB MORRISON

17 NOVEMBER 1993

HISTORY 450

DR. WARLICK

*Scanned 2011 from The Savannah Biographies Volume 24*

*Special Collections. Lane Library. Armstrong Atlantic State University. Savannah, GA 31419-1997*

I would enjoin the reader to read the following biography with as much enjoyment as I had preparing it. Lavinnia Florance Minis was a remarkable woman for any period of history. She did not accomplish any tasks or feats that would make her immortal or at least world famous, but in her own way she made a contribution that will last just as long. She was able to raise her children to be beneficial to society. This was accomplished by the strength she placed on the family, the same strength she received as a child. In this biography, there will be a strong theme of a close, caring, loving, supporting and religious family predominating through it. This what was important to her.

Lavinnia Florance was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, on May 26, 1825 to Jacob Levy and Hannah Florance<sup>1</sup>. She was the eldest child of the family. She had two other sisters and three other brothers. Shortly after her birth, the family moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This is inferred because the Florance family is not listed in the 1830 Louisiana census, but are found in the 1850 Pennsylvania census index<sup>2</sup>, living in the Southward section of the city. Her grandfather did not care for the last name of Levy, so he changed it.<sup>3</sup> Zachariah Levy Florance was a dentist in Charleston, South Carolina, and probably was not the most popular man in town due to the primitive techniques of

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<sup>1</sup>Savannah Morning News. 13 October 1923. p 14, col 1.

<sup>2</sup>Pennsylvania Census Index, 1850.

<sup>3</sup>Stern. p 74.

dentistry that prevailed during the early nineteenth century. This source has the correct spelling of his last name, Florance, whereas some sources have misspelled the last name as Florence. Lavinna's parents were both born in Charleston, South Carolina<sup>4</sup>, where they probably met. Both families were Jewish and regularly attended the synagogue. Since Jewish communities are close knit, and numerically, a minority, it is logical to assume that Hannah and Zachariah met in Charleston. Lavinna had always been used to living in a metropolitan area. She lived in New Orleans, Philadelphia and finally, Savannah. She was a city girl, and as will be shown, she was active in various societal and benevolent organizations.

Her family was a strong one in terms of parental support, comfort and guidance. While the sisters, Lavinna (nicknamed, Vinnia) and Rosina stayed in Philadelphia with their mother as young women (Lavinna was seventeen), their father wrote them a letter from New Orleans, giving them some guidelines on how young ladies of the period should conduct themselves. He instructed them to "... trust to your mother" and to "...keep in view your religion, it is your safeguard." Their father placed an emphasis on being well read (in keeping with the urbanite lifestyle) when he stated to the girls to follow their mother's suggestion for what books to read. "Mother is instructed to supply you with every book that is worth of your perusal." The final piece of advice for his daughters in this letter, Jacob instructed them that "... nothing

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<sup>4</sup>1880 Federal Census. ED 28, P 9, line 15

is more important to a female than ... distributing her time among her advocacy..."<sup>5</sup>

This strong supportive family structure continued through Lavinna's young adulthood, her marriage to Abraham Minis, until her parent's deaths. At that time, she became the matron for the family, continuing the strong maternal presence. A notable instance occurred in 1847, after Lavinnia had been rejected by a prospective suitor named Brummagem (aka "Brummy" by Lavinnia). After this shocking and trying event, Lavinnia received a letter from her brother in law, Moshe E. David, Rosina's husband, who wrote and stated his support for Lavinnia during her heartache. He told her it was alright to feel badly, and that he could see through her facade and could tell she was hurt by the rejection. He had taken time from his vacation in Rome to console his sister in law.<sup>6</sup> Tragedy struck on December 8, 1850, when after a moderately long illness, Rosina (Lavinnia's sister) died in Teignmouth, England, where Rosina and Moshe had been living. Her mother hurriedly traveled to her side.<sup>7</sup> Lavinnia first received news of the illness on November 15, 1850, when, in a letter from New York, her mother wrote to her, stating that Rosina was sick and in a hospital, but was being well taken care of. Rosina hadn't felt well enough to make the trip. Hannah Florance did not want her children to suffer, she wanted to carry the emotional burden by

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<sup>5</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 3, folder 34, 20 November 1842.

<sup>6</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 3, folder 34. 18 February 1847.

<sup>7</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 3, folder 34, 15 November 1850.

herself, stating "... I wish to be the greatest sufferer."<sup>8</sup> Then at 4:45 on Friday, the Reaper claimed Rosina. It would seem that Rosina had recovered enough to make the trans Atlantic crossing, but possibly the cold North Atlantic air had triggered the fatal relapse. Rosina died "in the arms of her doting husband."<sup>9</sup> Hannah, being of a practical and religious nature took care of the funeral arrangements and brought both Moshe and his children back to Philadelphia with her. Unfortunately, Lavinnia's letters back to her brother in law weren't able to be located. It would be interesting to see what the depth of her compassion and concern in Moshe's time of hurting and need would have been.

Hannah stayed in touch with her daughter up until her death on July 15, 1870, where she died in her home on the corner of 16th and Chestnut streets.<sup>10</sup> The strong family ties were still evident in all of the multitudes of letters that remain. In one such letter, Hannah told Lavinnia that nothing is better than "...the love of grown children."<sup>11</sup> Her father died September 4, 1867 <sup>12</sup> Although the family was close and loving, it is strange that in their correspondence, the women didn't discuss the approaching Civil War in any great depth, until Fort Sumter was attacked. Possibly they left such matters to the men of the house, because

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>The Minis Papers. box 3, folder 3, 11 December 1850.

<sup>10</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 2, folder 25, 8 March 1991.

<sup>11</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 3, folder 34, 8 June 1856.

<sup>12</sup>Stern.

Jacob had long written discussions about the war.

Lavinia and Abraham started their relationship during one of Abraham's many business trips to Philadelphia. Since he had two aunts living up there, they might have had a hand in the introductions. They were engaged in October 1850<sup>13</sup>, but had to wait at least a year before they could be married due to the deaths of Rosina and one of Abraham's relatives. Their religion forbade any type of joyful ceremonies for that one year period of mourning. Before they became married, a marriage settlement (pre-nuptial) was signed, with Abraham's father, Isaac, as the trustee on October 11, 1851.<sup>14</sup> Basically, this document stated that the couple can keep what they brought into the marriage. They were married October 22, 1851 in her parent's house.<sup>15</sup> Soon afterwards, Abraham and Lavinia moved to Savannah, where he went into business with his brother in law as commissions merchants. Abraham started his own business as a partner of Lavinia's brother, Florian, and upon Florian's leaving the firm, Abraham became the sole owner until he took his sons in as partners. Abraham did very well as a commission merchant, leaving to Lavinia after his death (November 6, 1889) a trust fund that regularly left her over \$4000 per annum. 1894 was a good year when the trust earned \$4640.86 for the family<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 2, folder 25, 8 March 1991.

<sup>14</sup>Chatham Co. Sup Court Records, vol 3 I's, p124.

<sup>15</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 2, folder 25, 8 March 1991.

<sup>16</sup>Chatham Co. Probate Court Records. M-721.

During this early part of the Savannah life, Lavinnia's father, Jacob, decided to build a house for his daughter and her children (Abraham could live there too). This house is located at 204 East Jones Street. The exact location is lots 47 and 48 Lafayette Ward, the northeast corner of Jones and Abercorn Streets. On August 2nd, 1857, a Savannah contractor, W.L. Vroom, was approached by Jacob Florance about building the house<sup>17</sup>. Building started in 1859 and by 1860, it was completed. Steven Decatur Button was the architect<sup>18</sup>. The house has three stories, a terrace, fenced in yard, twenty rooms, made of brick, and is still standing. The house stayed in the Minis family until 1941, when upon Maria's (Lavinnia's daughter) death, it was sold to the Savannah chapter of the American Red Cross.<sup>19</sup> Today it belongs to Ira and Nancy Kroger of Jacksonville, Florida.<sup>20</sup>

Lavinnia was a member of the Needle Woman's Friend Society, The Female Orphan Asylum, and she was instrumental in establishing the first school of nursing in Savannah, where she held various offices, ranging from secretary to directress.<sup>21</sup> Her husband was the president of the Union Society in 1870.<sup>22</sup> The Union Society

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<sup>17</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 2, folder 25, 2 August 1857.

<sup>18</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 2, folder 30, 17 December 1860.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Savannah Morning News. 17 February 1870, p 3, col 3, 28 February 1872, p 3, col 2, 11 January 1872, p 3 col 2, 24 November 1880, p 3, col 2.

<sup>22</sup>City Directory, Savannah, GA, 1870, p 187.



was established for the "care and education of orphans and destitute children without distinction of sex"<sup>23</sup> in 1750. The Union Society and The Female Orphan Asylum worked hand in hand to endow and support the Bethesda Boys Home as it is known now. Not only did Lavinnia carry on her family's traditions of love and support for her own children, but she and her husband were magnanimous enough to take on the responsibility to help those who couldn't help themselves. It is interesting that the second directress of the Orphan Asylum was a Mrs. Ann Clay<sup>24</sup>, who could have been the grandmother of Lavinnia's attorney during her later years.

While Abraham was running his business, being a member of the Union Board, conducting city business as an alderman,<sup>25</sup> and making money ( he had a worth of \$20,000 in both real and personal estates in 1870)<sup>26</sup>, Lavinnia was at home "keeping house"<sup>27</sup>, maintaining a household of up to five children, four servants, and making all of her younger children attend the Mickve Israel Synagogue, where she and Abraham had been members since their arrival in town.<sup>28</sup>

The family most probably was a very stable one because Abraham

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<sup>23</sup>Papers from Savannah Home for Girls. Box 1, folder 21.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>City Directories, Savannah, GA 1870, p 187, 1860, p 7.

<sup>26</sup>Federal Census, 1870, series m593, roll 141, p 179.

<sup>27</sup>Federal Census, 1870, 1880, ED 28, p 9, line 15.

<sup>28</sup>Savannah Morning News. 13 October, 1923, p 14, col 1.

business, while Lavinnia took care of the domestic issues. They were successful enough that almost every summer, Lavinnia and her children, usually Maria and the other ones not engaged in careers or families of their own, were able to travel to Philadelphia, Europe or to their favorite resort, Green's Bath House, Long Branch, New Jersey.<sup>29</sup> These travels slowed down and eventually stopped upon Abraham's death, and it was in 1890 that Lavinnia first appears in the city directory.<sup>30</sup> It is surprising that Lavinnia had enough time to devote to her societal and humanitarian concerns while raising five children. The four servants were probably indispensable.

Her first child was her son Jacob Florance, born November 12, 1852.<sup>31</sup> He attended college at Washington College in Lexington Virginia for two years, (where Robert E. Lee was the president) until the call of business became too great for him to resist.<sup>32</sup> He became a partner in his father's business at the age of eighteen<sup>33</sup>. He would later break his mother's heart. The next child was Maria, born December 30, 1853, who for some unknown reason decided never to marry, and spent her life with her mother

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<sup>29</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 4, folder 37, 1 August, 2 August, 1860.

<sup>30</sup>City Directory, Savannah, GA, 1890, p 334.

<sup>31</sup>Stern.

<sup>32</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 2, folder 30, 27 June 1870.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

in the family house.<sup>34</sup> She did travel with and without her mother. Once while in Philadelphia, she studied botany, astronomy and French.<sup>35</sup> She was mature enough to stay home at the age of seventeen and manage the household while every one else went to visit the grandparents in Philadelphia.<sup>36</sup> Rosina was born in Philadelphia on October 5, 1855,<sup>37</sup> but she did not live to see her first birthday. Isaac was the next one, born in 1857. He also joined his father in business but died at the age of thirty-six due to an ear abscess.<sup>38</sup> Abraham Jr. was born in 1859.<sup>39</sup> He was the only child not to follow his father into the merchant trade; he became a lawyer.<sup>40</sup> Lavinnia's last child was her namesake, Lavinnia (1864, a war baby, nicknamed Vinia and Baby), who went on to marry and raise her own family.<sup>41</sup> Maria and Jacob Florance (nicknamed Bubba) never had any children, although Bubba did marry.

The fact that between Lavinnia and Abraham (since all marriages are a partnership) were able to successfully raise five children who did not turn out badly, (they all prospered in their

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<sup>34</sup>Federal Census 1920, Vol 17, ED 74, sheet 6, line 85.

<sup>35</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 5, folder 51, Fall 1866.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid. 29 May 1870.

<sup>37</sup>Stern.

<sup>38</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 5, folder 54, newspaper clipping.

<sup>39</sup>Stern.

<sup>40</sup>City Directory, Savannah, GA 1890, p 334.

<sup>41</sup>Stern.

own ways) is a major accomplishment for any parent. Human conditions and technology may change, but human nature is as it was and as it will ever be: it is constant.<sup>42</sup> Only once did there arise a serious problem that threatened the family's stability. That was when Bubba decided to marry outside of the Jewish faith. Isaac, writing to Maria, worried that this action would cause J.F. to "have her (Lavinnia's) death upon his shoulders."<sup>43</sup> Although extremely upset, Lavinnia later relented, remembering that blood is thicker than water and allowed Bubba to be an executor for her will, but receiving only compensation.<sup>44</sup>

When anyone lives for ninety-eight years, a few interesting things happen. Lavinnia was no exception. A strange coincidence occurred in Lavinnia's life. On June 17, 1854, Abraham was thrown from the carriage and broke his right thigh.<sup>45</sup> Forty two years later, March 12, 1896, while Maria and Lavinnia were riding their horse drawn carriage down Bull Street, something fell from the sky and startled the horses, causing them to bolt. The women lost control of the carriage, and it raced pell-mell down the road towards Bay Street. Lavinnia decided to get while the getting was good, (it wasn't) and she bailed out of the vehicle. Upon hitting the ground, she had suffered abrasions and a broken upper arm.

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<sup>42</sup> Warlick, R. History 580, The Reformation Era, Armstrong State College, Winter 1992.

<sup>43</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 5, folder 54, 18 September, 1889.

<sup>44</sup>Chatham Co. Probate Court Records, roll M-9, #792.

<sup>45</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 70, folder 26, 17 June 1854.

Maria had stayed with the carriage. Fortunately, a man was able to help her by bringing the horses to a stop at the corner of Bay and Bull.<sup>46</sup> Lavinna had a bad year in 1870, when her youngest children had the chicken pox and the measles, the nursemaid became ill, Bubba was burnt while at college, (he fainted and then fell into the fire) her mother died, and Baby became sick after her grandmother's death<sup>47</sup>. When Sherman marched into Savannah, his troops raided the Minis' wine and liquor cabinets.<sup>48</sup> But 38 years later, the cabinets were well stocked enough to split the liquids between the three youngest living children. Lavinna avoided the yellow fever epidemic of 1876 by taking herself and the youngest children out of the city. Abraham, J.F., and Isaac were spared even though they stayed in town.<sup>49</sup> Finally, one of Lavinna's daughters in law bought a Pierce-Arrow automobile and wrote to Lavinna about it<sup>50</sup>. Lavinna must have thought automobiles to be a safer mode of transportation than horses, so she bought a Cadillac.

On October 12, 1923, at the age of 98, at 5:40 A.M., Lavinna died<sup>51</sup>. Unfortunately, this is the time of day when the elderly and the very young usually die. The human body's metabolism is at

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<sup>46</sup>Savannah Morning News. 12 March 1896, p 8, col 2.

<sup>47</sup>The Minis Papers. Series II, 15 July 1870.

<sup>48</sup>The Minis Papers. Series II, August 1865.

<sup>49</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 5, folder 54, 6 September 1876.

<sup>50</sup>The Minis Papers. Box 3, June 1916.

<sup>51</sup>Chatham Co Bureau of Vital Statistics, Vol 21, p 1664.

its lowest and slowest point at this time of the day. Dr. T.D. Waring had attended Lavinnia from January 23, 1923 until her death. The primary cause of death was "senility" complicated by carcinoma of the breast.<sup>52</sup> She died in her bed at home, and the Rabbi George Soloman presided over the closed family only service at the home. The internment was the next day at 4:00 p.m. at the family plot at Laurel Grove cemetery. It was a private affair, and like her husband's funeral, it was requested that flowers be omitted. Lavinnia and Abraham are buried side by side at Aisle 11, Lot 1431, along with Maria, Abraham Jr. and her infant daughter, Rosina<sup>53</sup>. After the estate was settled, there was a net worth of \$732,982.47, which consisted of almost entirely of land, stocks and bonds. By combining good business sense (learned from her husband and sons) with a sense of civic duty, Lavinnia had invested in Liberty Bonds and twenty-six different city improvement bonds which earned between 4 and 5.5% interest, and had made money. Lavinnia took care of her spinster daughter, leaving her the house, furniture, a silver service and chest set, and \$10,000. The stocks and bonds were divided between her three remaining children, Isaac's widow and his children. The tenement houses and other land she owned<sup>54</sup> were divided among the same people. Her last will and testament had a total of 389 pages after all the motions and paperwork of the

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>General Index to Keeper's Record Books, Laurel Grove Cemetery. Vol 2.

<sup>54</sup>Chatham Co Probate Court Records, roll m-9 #792.

executors was completed. Maria was able to buy the Cadillac from the estate on March 17, 1924<sup>55</sup>.

Lavinna's life was one of unselfishly taking care of her own children and those of strangers. She took care of her own sick children and destitute orphans. She had the time and resources available so she could dedicate a major part of her life to worthy causes. This lifestyle would be sure to bring immense satisfaction to any person. The life of Lavinna Florance Minis would be a proper one to emulate.

If anyone, after reading this paper, decides to research further into Lavinna's life, the following suggestions are offered; have more than one quarter's worth of time to invest in the project, travel to Philadelphia and New Orleans, explore and search their local historical societies, research the Federal Census records for Louisiana and Pennsylvania, look in the American Jewish Archives at Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati Ohio, contact members of the Florance family to locate letters written by Lavinna, and investigate the membership lists of the societies she was a member of, and try to find out who were her friends and their interactions. The Minis papers on file at the Georgia Historical Society contain much more information about the cultural and sociological aspects of nineteenth century life in Savannah and Philadelphia. Much of it was not included here because it wasn't directly related to the

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

life and type of person Lavinnia was. A much longer and in depth project could take the time to incorporate that information into a more complete picture of her life, but this biography still gives a vivid picture of the type of person Lavinnia was.



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